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"Cultural Identification: Voting Behavior and Ethnocentric Tendencies"

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Abstract

A research study sought to understand the relationship between international experience, ethnocentricity, and voting behavior. Contact hypothesis and ethnocentricity were studied as a means to explain the willingness to vote for a candidate of an African-American race. Fifty college students from the University of Portland consisted of the sample. The results of the study found that there is no significant relationship between ethnocentricity and willingness to vote for the candidate, yet there was an inversely related relationship between international experience and voting behavior. Limitations and future research for this study are also discussed.

"Cultural Identification: Voting Behavior and Ethnocentric Tendencies"

Many scholars have studied the meaningfulness of interracial communication and the barriers that prevent its success. There has long been a belief through which contact between these racial divides under perfect circumstances would increase awareness of other cultures and create a shared understanding of one another. This idea of communicating effectively and creating a positive perception of cultures other than one's own, depends on the amount of contact a person has with other cultures. Pettigrew & Tropp (2000) look at these differences and suggest that its, "controlling idea was that prejudice derived largely from ignorance." (pg. 93) This idea has commonly been referred to as the Contact Hypothesis. The idea that integrating people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds support a healthy intergroup relationship. Thus the connections between cultures have largely influenced relationships within racial divides.

The lack of relationships with other cultures has long kept the "white-American" stereotype alive. This is especially seen within the political system within the United States. Looking primarily at the African-American community, it is interesting to see how, "At virtually all levels of government the proportion of black elected officials is smaller than the proportion of blacks in the population" (Highton, 2004). In order to identify why this mis-proportionality exists, the intergroup relationships must be studied. According to Jeff Hitchcock (year), "We know that dominance still lies with white America, and this provides a continuing source of conflict. We know, too, that conflict is not only a quality of the dominant group" This idea that conflict still exists between cultures lends itself to the idea of ethnocentrism. The level of ethnocentrism prevalent in society and the racial make-up of a political candidate can determine the racial make-up of the elected office.

It is important to note the significance of ethnocentrism to the benefits of intergroup communication along with the idea that intergroup contact would reduce prejudice and ignorance, is key to understanding how political candidates of different racial and ethnic backgrounds come into office. Acknowledging this importance and active role ethnocentrism plays in our society and the extent to which it can affect our political perceptions of appropriate candidates plays a large role in this study. This paper investigates the relationship between the level of ethnocentricity a person feels and their willingness to vote for a political candidate of a different race through the lens of the contact hypothesis.

Literature Review

Investigating the relationships between other cultures and their willingness to vote for a political candidate can be explained well using two different theories. Contact hypothesis and ethnocentrism both describe reasoning behind why cultures do not interact, or how they can interact more successfully. Using these tools to understand the political process and voting behavior, one can learn the important role integrating societies and cultures. It is first important to look at the two theories and then apply their views toward the election process.

Contact Hypothesis

The Contact Hypothesis contends that the extent to which someone interacts with a person of a different racial or ethnic background can influence her/his attitudes about and relationships with members of that group, and even other outgroups. More specifically, the hypothesis states “That contact, particularly close and sustained contact, with members of different racial and ethnic groups promotes positive and, tolerant attitudes towards those groups (Powers & Ellison, 1995).” Furthermore, researchers have found that by studying interactions

based upon the contact hypothesis more favorable information is obtained on the values, lifestyles and experiences of different cultures. This shows that when encountering different ethnic and racial groups, positive interactions and information gaining can become a positive perception of the group, keeping a stereotype and racial bias non-existent.

Other researchers, Pettigrew and Tropp, used the research of Gordon Allport (1954) to understand the hypothesis. Allport held that intergroup contact would lead to decreased prejudice and if the contact situation was specially defined in four different groups. These groups were “equal status between groups in the situation”, “common goals”, “no competition between groups”, and “authority sanction for the contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000).” Each of these categories make reference to one common theme of equality. If in every situation people of different social and racial backgrounds come together and realize their shared goals, according to both researchers the interactions would result in positive perceptions of each other’s groups.

Looking specifically at race, the contact hypothesis can explain why stereotypes exist and how they can be overcome. This theory is limiting because it focuses primarily on intergroup attitudes rather than focusing on the specific attitudes of one group (whites) towards another (blacks) (Sigelman and Welch, 1993). A study in the Detroit Area investigated the intergroup contact between white and black people and how their contact affected their perceptions of one another and their relationships. They found that “blacks who socialized with white neighbors or coworkers harbored fewer feelings of alienation and distrust toward white society than blacks who lacked these experiences (Sigelman and Welch, 1993).” However, the study also found that simple, casual contact had little to no effect on the attitudes of blacks’ racial attitudes toward white people (Sigelman and Welch, 1993). Therefore, non-casual interactions across racial

divides seem to increase awareness of other cultures and create a positive perception of other races.

The idea that many white people hold prejudice against black people still exists within many communities. According to Benjamin Highton (2004), “The notion is straightforward. Some, arguably many, whites harbor anti-black beliefs and attitudes that make them less likely to support an African-American candidate for elective office (Highton, 2004).” This prejudice is found from a lack of communication and contact between the races. According to Allport (1954), if there was a higher level of communication between both races a positive perception would emerge, increasing the likelihood of voting for a black candidate. This interaction would need, however, to be in-depth and informative. Otherwise, casual contact could occur which would not be sufficient information to create a positive perception (Pettigrew, 1963).

However, other researchers suggest that white people do not hold prejudice against black people. For example, black officials are no longer considered rare or non-existent. “With numerous examples of African-American politicians, the fears that they may have once inspired among whites due to lack of information about them may have dissipated (Highton, 14).” Understanding the importance of race has long been a small part of studying the voting behavior of Americans. Also, the information pertaining to contact hypothesis lacks information about specific cultures and races and focuses on the larger picture of race and culture in general. According to Maria Krysan (2000) “Clearly racial policy attitudes are but one small piece of the complex picture that social scientists have assembled about racial-attitudes-and an even smaller part of the fuller body of research on the issue of race more generally.” Therefore, when understanding the role race plays in politics it is important to understand not only the intergroup communication, but also the feelings people have about their own society (Krysan, 2000).

Ethnocentrism

The level of ethnocentricity can influence many decisions, especially when voting for an elected official of a country. Marc Swartz (1951) supports this idea of ethnocentrism by stating that, “every society considers itself ‘superior’ to all others widely accepted [by] the social sciences.” According to him, ethnocentrism can be defined as:

“The view of things in which one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled with reference to it... Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities and looks with contempt on outsiders.” (Swartz, 1951)

This image of ethnocentrism shows that with a superior cultural view, there is a limit to how one accepts new ideas and information about other cultures. Marc Swartz (1961) examined the perceived differences between cultures and found that feelings are usually stronger towards one’s identifying culture rather than towards cultures unlike theirs.. “This difference is then referred to the values held in own group and is reacted to in terms of those values (Swartz, 1961).” Often this difference then leads to one’s own group to become superior to the other. What is seen as positive traits of one’s own country then becomes honored in that same society, and thus the high ethnocentric behavior is reinforced (Swartz, 1961). The perception of one’s own culture being superior to outside cultures is prevalent in almost every society especially in the political system. Usually the public wants to elect someone who reflects the same values as the majority of the country. Therefore when people vote, they are trying to elect someone like them.

The level to which one feels ethnocentric originates from the process of socialization and enculturation and also result of perpetual reintegration of a culture (Adams, 1951). Richard describes it as a behavioral problem rather than a communication issue. “Through the enculturation to which an individual is subjected, he is perpetually being taught by word and act that certain things are correct and that other things are incorrect (Adams, 1951).” Therefore, if ethnocentrism is due to influences in upbringing as Adams suggests, then the contact hypothesis would be correct in stating that continuous intergroup interaction would create equality in perceptions of other cultures. Therefore, because enculturation and socialization are influential variables in levels of ethnocentricity, Adams (1951) suggests it is a flaw within the American culture to only teach its own values and cultures. According to him, “By learning our own culture and being conditioned to doing things in the way it prescribes we are taught simultaneously that to do things in another way is wrong, incorrect, or impolite (Adams, 1951).” Thus we associate the actions of people who are from other cultures to be odd or different and thus not the same.

Many times it seems this behavior is ignored. People seldom question the authoritative sources that provide their cultural upbringing. Also, it is interesting to understand that although ethnocentric behavior is acknowledged, the implications are not. For example, a study conducted by Hraba (1972), showed that many black students found it “impractical to translate their racial ethnocentrism into social distance toward whites” (Hraba, 1972). This lack of understanding is one reason ethnocentric behavior seems to go unnoticed by many and accepted by others. Instead of knowing that a culture is different than one’s own, it is important to ask why. Thinking of this in the political

viewpoint, it is assumed that many people would only vote for a candidate who represented the culture they belong to. One researcher found that this ethnocentric behavior is expressed through the economic and political polarization. According to Adamsn (1951) this political polarization can be expressed as racial polarization and threatens the enculturation for children and society. He suggests that it is important that society "...embraces a culture of diversity and structures of equality (Adams, 1951)." The heightened differences in the American political structure between racial divides definitely promotes an ethnocentric behavior.

Rationale

This study addressed the research question regarding how ethnocentricity affected voting behavior, specifically in racial differences. The initial purpose of the study was to explore the relationship between studying abroad and familiarity with other cultures and how that affected one's willingness to vote for a candidate of a different race. After thorough research, the topic of interactions with other cultures and willingness to vote for a candidate of a different race was found to be too specific. Thus, the topic was broadened to research ethnocentric differences and willingness to vote for an African-American candidate. The concept of contact hypothesis and the parallels that exist between ethnocentric tendencies encourage assimilation. Thus, this study is focusing on the relationships between these phenomena and the behavior of voters. This study is looking primarily at the public's willingness to vote for an African-American candidate depending on their levels of ethnocentricity and contact with other cultures. Two hypotheses drove this study:

H1.) Greater reported influential contact experience with other cultures will

positively correlate with respondents' reported likelihood to vote for an African-American candidate.

H2.) Respondents' ethnocentrism scores will correlate negatively with their reported likelihood to vote for an African-American candidate.

Methods

Procedure and Participants

A survey was used to assess ethnocentrism, intergroup communication, and expected voting behavior. That survey was distributed to a Pacific Northwest university. This sample was chosen out of convenience and distributed among two classrooms to voluntary participants. Although convenient, this sample was chosen assuming that most of the participants were not African-American. The survey offered a candidate profile adapted from Ekstrand & Eckert (1981) and changed slightly to better reflect the results needed for racial differences. A category was added to the profile to identify which race the candidate identified with.

Instruments

Voting intentions.

Participants' were queried about their age, sex, race, religion, and political affiliation at the end of the survey to make sure participants did not associate with the categories before filling out the ethnocentric and voting behavior scales. Three scales and other questions were used to assess participants' other responses and test the hypothesis. First, following the candidate profile were several questions surrounding the participants willingness to vote for the candidate. Questions ranged from "Would you vote for this candidate?" to "Do you agree with the candidate on the issues." These questions rule out other identifying reasons why a participant

might not vote for the candidate, instead of solely on race. Respondents indicated their levels of agreement on a 5-point scale.

Ethnocentrism. Neuliep & McCroskey's (1997) ethnocentricity scale was given to understand the ethnocentricity of the participants. The ethnocentric scale contained 24 questions regarding the feelings toward other cultures and the culture that the participants identified with. The scale asked for levels of agreement on a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

International experience. A one-question statement assessed the amount of international experience each participant had experienced. This statement offered participants a 5-point scale to indicate their degree of experiences.

Results

All three continuous scales (voting behavior, ethnocentricity, international experience) were tested for correlations. Also, 50% of the surveys identified the candidate's race as African-American, while the other 50% did not indicate the candidate's race. Thus the surveys were divided into the control group and the group being tested. Hypothesis 1 (*H1*) assumed that there would be a significant positive relationship between experience with other cultures and the participants' willingness to vote for an African-American candidate in comparison to the control sample. In the sample with the race identified as African-American there was a non-significant positive relationship between experience with other cultures and willingness to vote for the candidate, Pearson $r = .03$, $p = .91$ ($n = 25$). In the control sample with no race included in the candidate profile there was an inversely significant relationship between willingness to vote for the candidate and participants' experience with other cultures, Pearson $r = -.39$, $p = .05$ ($n = 25$). Hypothesis One was not supported.

Hypothesis 2 (*H2*) assumed that high levels of ethnocentrism would result in a significantly inverse relationship with willingness to vote for the African-American candidate in contrast to the control group. In the sample containing the African-American race, there was non-significant positive relationship between ethnocentrism and willingness to vote for the candidate, Pearson $r = .27$, $p = .21$ ($n = 25$). In the control sample, there also was a non-significant positive relationship between ethnocentrism and willingness to vote for the candidate, Pearson $r = .27$, $p = .19$ ($n = 25$). Hypothesis Two was not supported.

Discussion

The results found that the samples did not support either hypothesis. However, there was one significant finding in the results of first hypothesis. The first hypothesis examined the relationship between one's view of their international experience and their willingness to vote for the candidate. When looking at the sample containing an identified race of the candidate, there was no relationship between international experience and willingness to vote for the African-American candidate. It seems that degree of international experience did not interact with their decision to vote for a candidate in this study. Therefore, there must be other deciding factors in voting for a presidential candidate.

When looking at the control sample, however, there were significantly different results. It seems that the less international experience a person reported having experienced, the less likely they were to report intending to vote for the candidate with no race defined. So, whereas when voting for the African-American candidate, international experience did not change their likelihood to vote for the candidate, including no race at all (assuming the candidate would be viewed as white) participants would most likely not vote for the candidate.

This finding is interesting when thinking of the contact hypothesis. Usually people identify with their own culture because of familiarity rather than feeling uncomfortable with other cultures. However, this data showed differently. It seems that less international experience or experience with other cultures the participants felt they had, there was some reason they would be less likely to vote for the candidate with no race identified. This might have been their assumptions that the candidate would be white/Caucasian, yet it does not explain the reasoning why. Researcher Pettigrew (1958) suggests that there are usually a small number of conditions are important in the decision making process of an individual, but mainly their own interests prevail. "That is, the intergroup changes occur only under a narrow range of conditions, since the basic personality orientation of the participants have not changed (Pettigrew, 1958)." He further goes on to say that these interests of individuals and their expectations of a leader will not be compromised by the affects of the larger population (Pettigrew & Tropp 2000).

In trying to understand the thinking of the participants, it is important to look at the candidate profile. The participants might not have agreed with the issues presented by the candidate, or they might not have been relatable to the current economic and political times, thus creating a resistance to the candidate's character. This difference also could be due to the participant's perception of the race of the candidate. Thus when imagining this candidate, the race the participant might have associated with him, might have been one they dislike.

The second hypothesis examined the relationship between strong ethnocentric feelings and how willing the participants were to vote for the candidates, one containing a race category of African-American and one with no race identified. The results showed that there was no relationship between the ethnocentric feelings and willingness to vote for either candidate. It seems that the stronger a participant identified with his/her own culture, there was little to no

effect on their opinion of voting for a candidate with African American race. This does not support the literature regarding ethnocentricity and one's identification with their culture (Swartz, 1961). This lack of support of the hypothesis could be due to many variables, one looking directly at the current political campaign in America now.

The first bi-racial candidate was elected as the next president of the United States, and has been a known political figure for quite some time. If participants were already familiar with the idea of an African-American leader, they would associate the race of the candidate into their ethnocentric beliefs. Frank Rich, an op-ed columnist from the New York Times investigates the lack of current American racism. He states, "White Americans whose distrust of black people in general crumbles when they actually get to know specific black people, including a presidential candidate who extends a genuine helping hand in time of a national crisis" (Rich, 2008). If Rich is right in stating that Americans do not think of race as an issue anymore, then there would be no relationship between voting for either hypothetical candidates and their race. Researcher Maria Krysan (2000) explains that sometimes the issue of racial differences and significance is a larger concept and needs to be viewed on a broader scale. "Indeed, the theoretical developments in this area of research have broader significance for understanding the contemporary dynamics of racial prejudice and race relations more generally" (Krysan, 2000).

Limitations

While conducting research, there were many limitations to the study. Only a limited number of articles have focused directly on voting behavior as associated with ethnocentricity and contact with other cultures. If more articles existed on the data, further insight or contradictions might have contributed to changing the method of research. Also, a major limitation in this study is borrowing the definition of contact hypothesis and ethnocentrism from

other scholars. By operationalizing the definition in the context of others, the view of contact hypothesis and ethnocentricity in this study was limited to how it was described by their previous studies. This not only could have impacted the research design, but also not representative of current ethnocentric trends. There was also a limitation in time. The study needed to be completed within a period of four months. The limitation on time affected the researcher's ability to conduct different methods of research and also affected the detail to which each theory was evaluated. More time could have resulted in a different direction of obtaining information from participants. Together, these limitations could have altered the findings in the study if they were great enough.

Future Direction

Considering the current political election where the first African-American candidate won the presidential campaign, it would be interesting to study the cultural impacts of current views of enculturation and ethnocentricity, and then contrasting them to past views of ethnocentricity. By looking at past studies and their levels of ethnocentricity, it would be interesting to see if America has changed their feelings towards other cultures. Also, understanding the relationship between ethnocentricity and willingness to vote for a candidate with a race other than African-American would be interesting to examine. The African-American race might have been too socialized already to make an impact on the participant's willingness to vote for the candidate. Changing the race to Asian or Hispanic might provide new results.

It would also be interesting to study the impacts of international experience with willingness to vote on other participants besides college students. College students might not have had much time to travel the world yet or have different views of the world, and thus might

vote differently for any candidate. Also, seeing that there was an inverse relationship between international experience and willingness to vote for the candidate without an identified race, it would be interesting to explore this concept further. Conducting other studies that focused primarily on participants who have had little to no experience internationally and their voting behavior within many different categories might be able to explain the data found within this study.

Little research was also done concerning the demographics of participants and their experience internationally and their willingness to vote for the candidate. Looking at the race, sex, and political affiliation would be interesting to see how each one related to one another and if there were any connections between these categories and willingness to vote for a candidate of another race. This might show different trends in the American culture that have not been reported yet.

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